

**State Board of Education  
Transformation Discussion with Vermont Superintendents  
December 18, 2007**

Superintendents broke into three groups to respond to three questions, facilitated by Department staff.

**1. As you envision a transformed education system, what current practices should be included that best serve the needs of students?**

- Data driven decision making
- Coaches-teacher leaders working with staff using data to determine changes
- Assessment – statewide and local with teachers becoming more attuned and understanding
- Standards evolved enough to use in a meaningful way which drives programming and curriculum
- Student centered focus is working with complimentary assessments
- Move toward community learning models.
- Change in focus from teaching to learning as a major change in the teaching profession.
- Service learning and connecting kids to that type of learning.
- Writing – not to lose this skill as it allows critical thinking and writing across the curriculum.
- Individualized learning for students.
- Make sure students are “current” with technology and make sure they have the tools they need to be successful
- Mentoring for new leadership/ teachers as they transition into the educational community
- Use of Pathwise Teacher evaluation is helpful and useful to talk about teaching with new teachers
- Focus on differentiated learning
- Growing assessment system in the state. Vermont state assessment is close to what kids need to know.
- What gets assessed is what gets done, Vermont is assessing those things and drives what is learned.
- Critical issue is student engagement in what they are learning. Superintendent sees many students that “go through the steps” but are not showing passion for what they are learning. They are cooperative, they are not getting in trouble. But they don’t have a passion for learning. Variety of practices promote passion: service learning. Students bridge the gap between skills and knowledge and a real world issue or need in the community; the community could be defined as the school or outside the school to the broader community. Example: Harwood Union High School—student group proposed to re-do the lighting in the school building to make it healthier and more environmentally friendly. These types of projects keep kids in engaged and interested in what they’re learning.
- This sounds like the three elements of rigor, relationships and relevance and students going deeper instead of broader.
- “Riding and sliding” will not build students’ capacity to be passionate about things later in life.

- Important that students are passionate about things related to learning...can't just be anything they're passionate about.
- Difficult for teachers to let go of their control over students' learning. Example: individualized learning plans. This takes a change in the system and a change in teachers. They move from controlling student learning to facilitating student learning.
- Just "getting by" in the system today is applauded.
- Students in Middlebury worked on individualized learning plans. Students worked to develop a portfolio that tracked their own progress against the standards. Students had to report on those portfolios to parents and teachers...was a very powerful tool for students.
- Formative assessment model: students are responsible for their own learning.
- Concern about changing too much about the state's standing, relative to other states, because the state does so well nationally. If you put some of Vermont's poorest performing schools in other states, they would do pretty well. Concern over changing something that is already working well. Additional concern is cost. Would hate to see any changes suggested that may ruin what "a wonderful thing." (Reference to proposed new governance structure). Vermonters feel positively about the schools. Would not want to alter the public's support for schools. Standards-based reform and GEs are examples of positive things for Vermont schools. Use of assessment data by teachers has helped schools focus on areas where schools and students are struggling. Important to make decisions based on data and use assessment results to inform future decisions.
- Assessment has become very important in Vermont and in the nation. Literacy, language, reading and math became very critical and teachers did not have as much time to teach science, social studies and the arts. Comparisons to other countries have revealed that we don't produce enough scientists and teachers have become very fearful of that. Assessment drives curricular decisions.
- Need to make better use of coherent and reliable research on the brain and on learning in general. "Paper and pencil" is not the preferred learning technique for most students...applied learning is important. Technical centers are good examples of research-based strategies in action because learning is applied and hands on. Credentials (based on industry standards) that students receive in technical centers are transferable and useful in the real world...and it is important that this remain the same...or provide additional opportunities to more students to attain those credentials.
- Vermont has had a tradition of ensuring that all content areas are represented in our standards. Schools have been told that our students need to be more creative. Thinks that Vermont does a good job of maintaining creativity in schools but has heard "horror stories" around the state of schools doing away with elements of "whole child" education because of intense focus on reading and math. Standard is that students graduate and become "productive members of society" and that they have the tools to do this. Hope that state does not move away from a focus on the "whole child," something that he thinks was done well in the state in the past.
- Disagreement over the importance of focusing on the whole child. Also important to ensure that students attain foundational reading and math skills.
- Assessment is a tool. Focus should be on performance, not measuring performance. Current tools are too narrow.

- “200% day”: We need to be cautious about putting a group of experts together and letting them define what students should know. Don’t have a 200% day to do all that everyone thinks should be done. OGAP project—Marge Petit—what are the critical things that are the drop dead skills that students can’t walk out the door not learning. Then worked with teachers to determine how to ensure that students have those skills, how to teach them and how to measure them. Power standards/essential questions. Important to not lose these. Focused mode is important. Should shed the idea that we should do what everybody says we should do...there is already some good work going on but it needs to be streamlined and focused. “It’s all good” but it needs to be prioritized.
- Community support stems from theatre/art and sports...and that these components of our schools and education system can’t be removed because they are important to kids and to communities.
- Issues that are timeless and that will guide our work in the future: (1) equity (ensuring that all students are provided with equal and consistent opportunities), (2) student-centered school, (3) absolute requirement for a safe and orderly learning environment.
- Must think about the K-12 continuum. Focus should be on the travel of the child throughout the system. If the elementary experience is rich but the middle school experience is poor, resources need to be shifted.
- One way to work towards equity across schools is to have teachers work across schools. Once a month in this SU, kids go home at 12:30pm and teachers from across the schools in the SU (organized by work group) come together to collaborate around specific themes/projects/topics like improving literacy skills, etc. Feedback (exit cards are required after each meeting) is positive; teachers think it is the right thing to do. Creates an opportunity for teachers to think about students moving across the continuum...it is not just one teacher’s classroom or school...it is a whole system. Every time a child drops out at the high school, superintendent takes the child’s name down to the elementary school and discusses it with teachers. Teachers are not usually surprised but this is a sign of hope because it shows that there is awareness. This awareness is key. Requiring elementary school teachers to attend high school graduation is window dressing...it takes something more meaningful and significant.
- Challenge is to get teachers out of their classrooms. They first looked at data and talked to teachers (focus groups) to identify areas of need. One example is writing. There was a large discrepancy across writing achievement across schools. Teachers realized this and noted this in the focus group meetings. It is in the interest of the best writing school in the SU to help improve the performance of the lowest performing writing school in the SU because it will eventually impact everybody.
- Another area of need was student engagement. Teachers left the building each day exhausted, having worked very hard...when the students left school looking pretty relaxed. One goal is to have students working just as hard as the teachers.
- Important to have good people work with schools. Best people in the state are hard to get.
- Rural nature—pushing hard for integrating technology across content areas and grade levels; looking into online learning technology—only way we can offer things to students reasonably; because of the rural nature of our schools, summer school becomes difficult to offer and students may find themselves in a hole at the end of high school and therefore leave high school before graduation; hope to help all of students.

- We finally have a district tech coordinator and some key teacher tech leaders who are doing weekly seminars on Wed & Thurs from 3-6 covering a variety of tech issues and teaching teachers how to integrate tech into their teaching.
- Online learning—we are very rural, but across the board we are finding the alternatives expensive—online learning is expensive. We see other centers in the state being more in alignment with 21st century skills, so some of our students are going to other tech centers.
- I would like to reflect backward for a moment—we came out with a rich document for the Standards/Vital Results in VT; shortly after that we started talking about assessment; since that movement to assessment, I haven't heard much about the Vital Results and the Vital Results are wonderful. What happened was, we refocused education on certain standards that are assessed and the Vital Results went away. School boards have resources to fund what we assess. What will drive education? Is it going to be assessments?
- Local Assessment Plan—developing assessments that assess vital results where they are already happening; We assess along a continuum (problem solving; inquiry in science). What does it mean to be an effective citizen? We have projects that students demonstrate abilities. What are good things to use to measure what students should know and be able to do?
- I'm frustrated by this initiative simply because it's another initiative. It's about doing—I don't know that we've done and completely implemented previous initiatives. Is this another attempt to define what we are going to do or an attempt to DO something? We should be focusing on the biome, not the trees. My mind is in the process of being blown away. I have children that are at least as much of a citizen of the world as they are Vermont. I tend to be the resident cynic. The proof is in the doing and not the planning.
- I would certainly hope that it is about doing. If there is a reason for you to give up your valuable time, there really needs to be an Action Plan that defines what that doing really looks like.
- Our agenda is being defined by the governor who says that we can't afford public schools. Who is speaking up for the quality attributes of education? Nobody.
- I think there are quite a few people speaking up—they might not be heard, but I think that people are speaking up. We need to come up with a way of addressing the needs of young people that help them be effective members of that global community. There is a real concern that we look good on paper but we still have a significant number of students who are not doing well in the current system. We do have others who are doing well. How can we make sure that we are doing well by all of our children? All of you at the table need to tell us where we need to go.
- What is this and where are we going? We are trying to fix a large problem from one perspective. How do we partner with other groups? If we could work more as a whole we wouldn't have to be as worried about what we are doing in our own districts. Something else new that we have to work toward, I'm not sure that is going to get us where we need to go until we fix some of the foundational pieces.
- Social Service—not sure that we've contacted that group.
- I got very excited when I got this in the mail. It's the first time that I've seen something come out of the DOE that shows some exciting thinking. What current practices should we keep? Educators keep all kind of things that they shouldn't be keeping. If you go into any school and ask a teacher, they can tell you what mastery

is. We want to keep that. We don't control that anymore—we don't control the information. It's there in the environment for adults and children to pick up at their will. I don't like to use the word classroom—what is the learning environment going to look like? What is the staffing going to be? We need to utilize technology so that we can use it to create this interdisciplinary learning environment. It may not be the same district to district. I'm not worried about the calendar or governance. The information is there for anyone to access. You can write all the standards that you want. The train has left the station. I think there is an opportunity to get a lift and catch up with the train if we do it right. Create a flexible learning environment that is based on mastery. If we are going to do this we need to give teachers and students the tools to reach mastery. The tool is technology. We are stuck in Vermont. I can't buy anything. I'll go into the penalty zone. There isn't enough money to help the schools that need help. Truly a case of equity for children in Vermont. Schools can't fill the gap anymore. That's one specific thing that could be done for students in VT. It's a tangible piece that legislatures and policy makers could see in schools.

- Key elements are:
  - Critical Thinking
  - Technology
  - Team Work
- Concern was first that we have so many immediate problems that we can't give our attention to this in a way that would be meaningful. Philosophical change—schools were trying to create curriculum in a way to meet students' needs—DOE role has been accountability; School Quality Standards tells us what to do and how to do it; there are wonderful things in the document, but many challenges are in front of us. Let's do it in a way that gives schools/districts an opportunity for creativity and make it into something that will work; feel very restrained right now because of the accountability aspect of the DOE.
- Suspend the past for a moment—what do we want our children to know and be able to do; what do we need to be doing in our environment to get our students to get there? What's already there that helps us to answer the question? How do we make sure that when we send our children through an educational system, they are able to do all of the things that we hope for them?
- Modeling—if the state board is leading, what are we hearing? DOE—highly increasing regulatory role—why are we inventing assessments independently?
- DOE does have an online resource for assessments called Riverdeep.
- School Quality Standards/Rules and Accountability—the system is breaking—If you truly want us to move forward, what can we let go of?
- What is impeding the kinds of things that you are talking about? Communication and building relationships seems vital. Is it too tightly designed as it currently stands? Which of the school quality standards need to be represented differently than how they are currently on the books? What does that mean in terms of programs and activities for kids?
- I'm trying to define what school quality is for kids. What more futuristic models of education could look like—I think people are bound by the bricks. If we have to do that it's harder to do more of this community-based learning. What should it look like to support the Vital Results?
- Pragmatic side—What is the flexibility that we need? Curriculum and instruction—use the School Quality Standards to guide us. I'm facing four schools, four school

- boards who are saying we are going to cut this budget. In January, I might be able to get them to accept a 3% increase and that's by cutting teachers. One school, every child has a computer. I need to add a tech person for the other schools if I get computers because my teachers don't have the skills. Help me deal with my boards and the changing climate and technology when I only have X amount of dollars.
- Moving all kids forward—regardless of what the doing looks like in the current environment—Accountability needs to be there. What do we need to expect for all kids? What flexibility can be worked into the School Quality Standards? What do we expect to measure through assessment?
  - Brandon Training School—Learning disabled students attended and the state took care of them for life. Weeks School—the state took care of all kinds of kids. We are the Brandon Training School and the reform school for the state of Vermont. Think of the money it would cost the state to run Brandon Training School or Weeks School today. Those students are in our schools. We need to get across how much money we save the state as well as how much we spend.
  - We don't even have a coordinated way to deal with those kids in an alternative way. There may be a more efficient regional way to meet the needs of these children. The children that I'm most concerned about are children of drug users. We are seeing students with health issues as a result of drug use by their parents. They are not academic needs, but these are needs beyond what our capacity is. We can handle students with academic difficulties. It's not for lack of imagination and creativity within the academic realm.
  - Parents had a similar question. We talked about partnerships—a need for supporting parents at a very fundamental level that goes onto another realm above and beyond education.
  - Advocacy—more and more of the social responsibilities have been shifted to schools. We all have heart rending decisions—we've had a lot put on us; it's not about the high cost of educating, but the high cost of not educating.
  - Schools have taken on multiple roles and the governor is still saying that we're not doing a good job and so I'm frustrated.
  - As a whole we are optimistic about education for children in Vermont. The Medicaid cuts are going to kill. We don't know how we are going to support these families.
  - The health and well-being of children is what we really have as a goal, not just their education.
  - I started thinking about Vital Results—on an optimistic note, we do have a program. We are just beginning our fifth year. It's an incredible program for students in transition because they cannot function in the mainstream. It's a really positive thing that we have been able to fund.
  - Alternative perspective—we had a program like that but it was always the first thing that people looked at to cut during budget time.

## **2. What new practices should be included?**

- Service Learning needs to come back to connect public school education to the community.
- 5th year for teachers actually working and being mentored by master teachers
- Mentoring also for new leadership
- Work regionally to help bring meaningful professional development both new and seasoned teachers, statewide calendar etc.

- Training for school board members and additional professional development. Responsibility to students and community and their roles
- Better match between what is school need and what higher education is providing. Both for teachers and administrators. Closer alignment needed. Why aren't these people prepared and why do schools have to spend so much time and resources to train.
- New method for networking between our schools.
- Make it the states role to provide the networks for mutual support and expertise from the state level.
- High Schools on the Move was a good document, but there was nothing behind it to make it work. Make sure state backs up these initiatives.
- New (subject) curriculum focused on the 21st century. New definition for literacy.
- Make sure tools are in place in rural communities as far as technology, broadband, wireless, etc.
- Look at the skills kids are going to need to succeed. Narrowing the curriculum based on NCLB requirements have narrowed the focus of learning.
- Build the culture for learning.
- Create visions of what learning is for communities. Need to support the things that we really believe in.
- Have the conversations about 21st century learning. Use the 4 R's to help drive learning
- Much better at engaging in the public – tell them our stories, focus forums, etc. – that is not happening anymore. Need a focused effort with the public.
- Teacher quality is crucial if we want to improve student achievement. External workshops are not as valuable as teachers working together to analyze and reflect on student assessment data.
- We have to provide opportunities to students who have special interests (career paths, musical talent, athletic abilities)...whatever that passion is, school must accommodate those kids' needs (i.e. release them to attend activities, etc.). School should provide opportunities to students that aligns learning plans with students' own passions and goals. Relate their passion to learning and academics. It needs to be realized as a critical part of their learning. School should recognize the value of those experiences and do what is necessary to make those experiences possible for students.
- Individualized learning plans—teachers must build a relationship with students to really try to understand what kids are interested in. School must be flexible for kids. Sounds like a move toward a competency-based system where students have to meet certain outcome-based requirements. Competencies might not even be based in the school building...perhaps students could attain credits/meet requirements by going to a design school.
- In the future, sees something called a school but the notion that the school is the only community of learning is antiquated. Teachers will still be charged with providing students with foundational skills but will become facilitators that allow students to take more ownership over their learning. 21<sup>st</sup> century skills require more project-based learning. To kids, community is digital and spans all traditional boundaries and borders. Schools need to stop teaching children in the ways adults have been taught. This requires teachers to adopt a whole new host of skills so that they can facilitate this process for students. Classrooms of today with chalkboards, teachers at the center of learning will not last through another generation of students.

- Career pathways—all kids need to have career awareness and ability awareness. Proper use of all the required tests is for the parent and the child to know who they are and where they are...and to inform realistic career plans that align with their strengths and weaknesses. At this point, it is very common for vocational/technical students to have career awareness but it needs to be the case for all students, including the high achievers. When students craft their schedules, they work to fill up their time but it needs to be more focused on long-term career goals. Parents also need to be involved in this process. There is this distinction between academic and vocational students...career paths are important for both. Programs of study need to be matched with student interests and strengths (could be as broad as up to six categories).
- Teacher leadership and the shift in leadership roles is key to the success of this initiative. Teacher unions prohibit this from happening (connection to teacher licensure, etc.)
- More small schools than large schools in the state. Difficult to collaborate if you are one teacher/department of one. Challenge to promote teacher leadership and collaboration in small schools. Perhaps one solution is inter-district professional development and collaboration.
- Extended learning time, extended school day, year-round schooling. Not all children should have to participate in year-round school and extended learning but students in poverty regress during the summer so perhaps providing additional opportunities. It is not “one size fits all”—what can we do to meet specific kids’ needs? It does not have to be something required for all. 5.5 hour school day is an archaic metric. 9-month school year is an archaic measure. Learning can happen anywhere at any time.
- Sentiment that things expressed in meeting match with transformation document...student-centered learning, flexible learning environments, doing away with coursework requirements and shift to competencies. Not “one size fits all.” Need to re-think how we deliver education services; it does not have to be one teacher in front of a group of students for a certain amount of time each day.
- Don’t want for technology, but we are not utilizing it as well as we could. I would like to see—the value of experiential education, connections to the natural world, science. Experiential, hands-on, inquiry based experiences in our schools are essential.
- I would add that the whole issue of teachers becoming comfortable with technology, but then how do we get to the next level where students understand the power of technology and students make appropriate choices. We are sponsoring a tech opportunity this summer.
- It’s not so much that we haven’t had good instruction around inquiry, but maybe it’s a refocusing to some extent on the Vital Results especially when we think about 21 Century Skills and engage rural kids in substantive activities.
- Reward schools that are grasping at deeper issues. Let’s think of a way to assess and reward schools that are doing those things.
- Flexibility and technology—Individual student plan—if there is not flexibility in the system to allow systems to head in the directions that they need to, it won’t work. It’s a way for students to meet their goals in open-ended ways.
- We need to equip students with the creative use of information. The only way to empower is to bring young people together. Community-based learning—going out and coming back into the school.



- Individual Learning Plan—it would be nice to celebrate innovation and risk taking in schools. That might be one area that the State Board could do that. Provide something to look at as exemplars/models.
- Recent graduates would also be a good group to get a perspective from.

**3. What questions, issues, suggestions does the document, *How are the Children?...* raise for you that you would want the State Board to be mindful of in its public policy role and as it moves forward toward next steps in this process?**

- Once technical assistance money is gone, what happens? Creates inequity between identified and non-identified schools
- How do we get the infrastructure in place to facilitate change.
- How to reach the children and families that need to be reached.
- Balance of culture, vision and we never seem to get to the point of implementation.
- Use professional behavior in education on how to use best practices to drive change that is needed.
- Students today need more than what is being provided.
- Set some bars, maybe there needs to be some top down requirements that are thoughtful and are best practice.
- Expectations need to be set on all levels.
- Support for K-12 continuum.
- It isn't that we don't know what we need to do, it is that we cannot implement and make it work.
- Biggest piece is re-training veteran teachers to relinquish power so that students can direct their own learning. Example of a possible project: those students who enjoy hunting—take them with a group of teachers on a weekend hunting trip and connect the experience to learning (science, math, etc.) We might be turning them off to learning if we make them take reading many times a day. But students somehow absorb what is in a hunting manual. So how do we connect learning to students' passions and interests?
- Move to a competency-based system where students have multiple pathways and opportunities to demonstrate learning and success. Let student interests help drive learning.
- Challenge is that state can be “gung ho” about ideas like this but the problem is cost. It may cost more money to accomplish them. Commitment from SBE, DOE, Commissioner, Legislature, etc. is crucial to ensuring that it moves forward. Individual learning plans are not free. They will require more time on the part of teachers or more guidance counselors. How do you do the good things you want to do?
- Have to figure out how to do things differently. How are services going to be delivered in different ways? It's not as if you're going to have a teacher in front of 25 kids and then stack things/responsibilities on top of that. Will require a lot of thinking out of the box—how can the system change?
- Thinks current governance structure impedes this “out of the box” thinking. How should the statewide system (or at least regionally) be organized to support and facilitate this change? Superintendent reports having to do the same things over and over again...very inefficient. This can crush an organization. The redundancy is unnecessary. We need to be smarter about how we go about the business of schooling.

- Some communities don't want to give up their sense of community. But you could achieve some level of consistency and efficiency without reorganizing governance...like making policies consistent, making curriculum consistent, etc. Small schools are fearful.
- Winooski is looking at some of these issues. Most schools have Internet access and computers yet very rarely are schools using the tools effectively. Developing virtual schools, virtual classrooms (where students can do work from home)...we're not doing this type of work yet. Some internet sites are restricted because of funding requirements. Proves to be an obstacle to use of technology. Exciting to think about what they want to do. New process is (1) what do we want to do? And then (2) what obstacles exist and how do we get around them?
- Need to recognize that this is the wrong group to be thinking about how to transform education. We're in the fish bowl ourselves. First place to start is to talk to students and find out what they want to learn and do. We need to learn from the renegades and from others that have tried these strategies. Doesn't think we have the capacity or the ability to look above our own shoulders.
- What does it mean to be an effective citizen?
- What are good things to use to measure what students should know and be able to do?
- What will drive education? Is it going to be assessments?
- Is this another attempt to define what we are going to do or an attempt to DO something?
- Who is speaking up for the quality attributes of education?
- We do have others who are doing well. How can we make sure that we are doing well by all of our children?
- What is this and where are we going?
- How do we partner with other groups? (social services)
- I don't like to use the word classroom—what is the learning environment going to look like? What is the staffing going to be?
- How do we make sure that when we send our children through an educational system, they are able to do all of the things that we hope for them?
- If you truly want us to move forward, what can we let go of?
- Which of the school quality standards need to be represented differently than how they are currently on the books? What does that mean in terms of programs and activities for kids?
- What should it (quality education) look like to support the Vital Results?
- What is the flexibility that we need?
- What do we need to expect for all kids?
- What flexibility can be worked into the School Quality Standards?
- What do we expect to measure through assessment?